

STRESS

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Work-life balance: Ways to restore harmony and reduce stress

If your work life and personal life are out of balance, your stress may be running high. Here's how to reclaim control.

Finding work-life balance in today's frenetically-paced world is no simple task. Spend more time at work home and you miss out on a rewarding personal life. Then again, if you're facing challenges in your personal life such as caring for an aging parent or coping with marital or financial problems, concentrating on your work can be difficult.

Whether the problem is too much focus on work or too little, when your work life and your personal life feel out of balance, stress — and its harmful effects — is the result.

To take control, first consider how the world of work has changed, then reevaluate your relationship to work and apply these strategies for striking a more healthy balance.

How work invades your personal life

There was a time when employees showed up for work Monday through Friday and worked eight to nine hours a day. The boundaries between work and home were fairly clear then. But the world has changed and, unfortunately, the boundaries have blurred for many workers. Here's why:

- **Global economy.** As more skilled workers enter the global labor market and companies outsource or move more jobs to reduce labor costs, people feel pressured to work longer and produce more to protect their jobs.
- **International business.** Work continues around the world 24 hours a day for some people. If you work for an international organization, you might be on call around the clock for troubleshooting or consulting.

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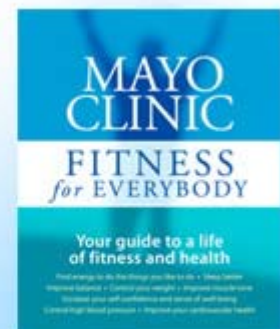
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- **Advanced communication technology.** People now have the ability to work anywhere — from their home, from their car and even on vacation. And some managers expect that.
- **Longer hours.** Employers commonly ask employees to work longer hours than they're scheduled. Often, overtime is mandatory. If you hope to move up the career ladder, you may find yourself regularly working more than 40 hours a week to achieve and exceed expectations.
- **Changes in family roles.** Today's married worker is typically part of a dual-career couple, which makes it difficult to find time to meet commitments to family, friends and community.

If you've experienced any of these challenges, you understand how easy it is for work to invade your personal life.

Overtime obsession

It's tempting to work overtime if you're an hourly employee. By doing so, you can earn extra money for a child's college fund or dream vacation. Some people need to work overtime to stay on top of family finances or pay for extra, unplanned expenses.

If you're on salary, working more hours may not provide extra cash, but it can help you keep up with your workload. Being willing to arrive early and stay late every day may also help earn that promotion or bonus.

Before you sign up for overtime, consider the pros and cons of working extra hours on your work-life balance:

- **Fatigue.** Your ability to think and your eye-hand coordination decrease when you're tired. This means you're less productive and may make mistakes. These mistakes can lead to injury or rework and negatively impact your professional reputation.
- **Family.** You may miss out on important events, such as your child's first bike ride, your father's 60th birthday or your high-school reunion. Missing out on important milestones may harm relationships with your loved ones.
- **Friends.** Trusted friends are a key part of your support system. But if you're spending time at the office instead of with them, you'll find it difficult to nurture those friendships.

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- **Expectations.** If you work extra hours as a general rule, you may be given more responsibility. This could create a never-ending and increasing cycle, causing more concerns and challenges.

Sometimes working overtime is important. It's a choice you can make to adjust to a new job or new boss or to pay your bills. If you work for a company that requires mandatory overtime, you won't be able to avoid it, but you can learn to manage it.

If you work overtime for financial reasons or to climb the corporate ladder, do so in moderation. Most importantly, say no when you're too tired, when it's affecting your health or when you have crucial family obligations.

Striking the best work-life balance

It isn't easy to juggle the demands of career and personal life. For most people, it's an ongoing challenge to reduce stress and maintain harmony in key areas of their life. Here are some ideas to help you find the balance that's best for you:

- **Keep a log.** Track everything you do for one week. Include work-related and non-work-related activities. Decide what's necessary and satisfies you the most. Cut or delegate activities you don't enjoy, don't have time for or do only out of guilt. If you don't have the authority to make certain decisions, talk to your supervisor.
- **Take advantage of your options.** Find out if your employer offers flex hours, a compressed work week, job-sharing or telecommuting for your role. The flexibility may alleviate some of your stress and free up some time.
- **Manage your time.** Organize household tasks efficiently. Doing one or two loads of laundry every day rather than saving it all for your day off, and running errands in batches rather than going back and forth several times are good places to begin. A weekly family calendar of important dates and a daily list of to-dos will help you avoid deadline panic. If your employer offers a course in time management, sign up for it.
- **Rethink your cleaning standards.** An unmade bed or sink of dirty dishes won't impact the quality of your life. Do what needs to be done and let the rest go. If you can afford it, pay someone else to clean your house.
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- **Communicate clearly.** Eliminate confusing misunderstandings by communicating clearly and listening carefully. Take notes if it helps.
- **Fight the guilt.** Remember, having a family and a job is okay — for both men and women.
- **Nurture yourself.** Set aside time each day for an activity that you enjoy, such as walking, working out or listening to music. Unwind after a hectic workday by reading, practicing yoga or taking a bath or shower.
- **Set aside one night each week for recreation.** Take the phone off the hook, power down the computer and turn off the TV. Discover activities you can do with your partner, family or friends, such as playing golf, fishing or canoeing. Making time for activities you enjoy will rejuvenate you.
- **Protect your day off.** Try to schedule some of your routine chores on workdays so that your days off are more relaxing.
- **Get enough sleep.** There's nothing as stressful and potentially dangerous as working when you're sleep-deprived. Not only is your productivity affected, but you can also make costly mistakes. You may then have to work even more hours to make up for these mistakes.
- **Bolster your support system.** Give yourself the gift of a trusted friend or co-worker to talk with during times of stress or hardship. If you're part of a religious community, take advantage of the support your religious leader can provide. Ensure you have trusted friends and relatives who can assist you when you need to work overtime or travel for your job.
- **Seek professional help.** Everyone needs help from time to time. If your life feels too chaotic to manage and you're spinning your wheels worrying about it, talk with a professional such as your doctor, a psychologist or a counselor recommended by your employee assistance program (EAP).

Services provided by your EAP are usually free of charge and confidential. This means no one but you will know what you discuss. And if you're experiencing high levels of stress because of marital, financial, chemical dependency or legal problems, an EAP counselor can link you to helpful services in your community.

You now have some suggestions for improving the

You now have some suggestions for improving the balance between your work and your personal life. Why not take the next step and give these suggestions a try?

Balance doesn't mean doing everything. Examine your priorities and set boundaries. Be firm in what you can and cannot do. Only you can restore harmony to your lifestyle.

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